DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 154 382 CS 204 098

AUTHOR Cowan, Elizabeth
TITLE Tradition.
PUB DATE Feb 78
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Conference on English in the Two-Year College (13th, Nashville, Tennessee, February 16-18, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; *Composition (Literary); Composition Skills (Literary); *Conventional Instruction; *English Instruction; *Higher Education; *Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

Abstract words such as "tradition" are like ancient coins whose concrete images have worn away. Traditions can be of two forms--either alive, amendable, and expandable (such as those in a family's annual Christmas celebration), or dead, empty formalities. An example of an empty tradition is the strict rule in freshman composition classes that papers must have thesis statements; although this rule is not wrong, it is necessary to teach students the techniques of invention in order for the tradition to come back to life. Students who find something to say through one of the methods of formal invention theory will then understand about thesis sentences and will be able to write appropriate ones for their essays. There is nothing inherently wrong with traditions, then: the crucial issue is the liveliness of the spirit behind them. (CC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED154382

Elizabeth Cowan

TRADITION

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Preparing this talk has given me an opportunity to see what the word tradition means to me. Julius Jaynes, in his fascinating book on consciousness, says that abstrct words, like tradition, are ancient coins whose concrete images in the busy give and take of talk have worn away with use. I wondered after reading Jaynes what tradition had meant when it was originally spoken in Latin--or perhaps even earlier in some Indo-European language. Though I could find words in the dictionary that stood for that original meaning, there was no way for me in the 20th century to grasp the experience in that ancient time that led to the need for coining a word like tradition. I could only guess: was the word coined to describe cavedwellers coming around a campfire to tell stories the first full moon before the big spring hunt? Did people invent the term to describe the act of holy persons taking fire to the altar to pray for success in battle? What were the first activities that were labeled traditions?

To move past this inability to know the concrete image on the ancient coin, I took another statement from Jaynes: the way to understand something is to arrive at a metaphor for that thing by substituting something more familiar to yourself. The feeling resulting from substituting something familiar for something unknown, Jaynes says, is the feeling of understanding. So, to understand the word tradition--since my brief life experience is such a small piece of the vast history of the word--I would have to find something I was familiar with that would give me a feeling that I understood the term. I began by looking up the word in the dictionary. Then I thought of all the traditions I know about; I made lists of traditions; I conjured up every denotation and connotation I could for

CS204098

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Elizabeth Cowan TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

the word tradition. As a result of hunting down these familiar things and putting them on paper, I had a real surprise (which is often one of the wonderful by-products of writing.) What I had thought was a rather granite-like term about which I had decided opinions I saw was actually a symbol for acts and ways of behaviour which at some point in time had been alive. I saw that what was behind the word tradition was a societal process; in fact, a whole history was contained in the word.

In my own experience I saw tradition taking two forms: one I closely associated with my family; the other I more closely associated with my work and the way I live my life. In the first--the traditions of my family--I find great security and identity. Example: Take the food we have every Christmas--two kinds of dressing because somebody doesn't like oysters; fruit cake always made by Mother and months in advance; chocolate balls and sweet potato pie. We have a special "program" on Christmas Eve in which everybody has a set thing to do each year. We always expect a tree too small for the pile of presents under it. What I notice about these traditions is that they provide our family a sense of community and togetherness; in fact, they can be counted on like a haven in a storm. They are a place to come into from the demanding, changing out of doors where we all--parents and children alike--live the rest of our lives. Somehow they represent verities; they testify that there are some things that do not change.

These traditions, however, in spite of their constancy, have two qualities that keep them alive: they are amendable and they are expandable. I think of how they were amended the year I moved to New York City. I was living alone; the apartment was tiny; I didn't have much money. I wasn't getting to go home for Christmas for the first time in my 32 years. What was amazing was that I could transplant my family's traditions to 12 W. 15 Street and enjoy them as if

I were home. The tree turned out to be sticks sprayed white and purchased from a vendor on the street. I put those sticks into a silver water pitcher and decorated them just as if they were a large fir tree. The family fruitcake got mailed to me in a coffee can; and my chocolate balls went to Tennessee in a cardboard box. I called in my part on the program. Though that Christmas wasn't the same, it also was. The spirit of the traditions was alive and well and living in New York City as well as in Soddy-Daisy, Tennessee.

A couple of years later I saw how easily expandable the family traditions were. When Greg came into our family, the first Christmas he cooked some cheese balls which for some error or another in the recipe spread out to cheese humps instead of balls. In just three years they have become a part of the family Christmas food tradition, and everybody wants to be sure he has made the cheese flatties for this year. When he didn't get them done this past season until Christmas Eve, there was much consternation and unrest until the humps were on the table ready to be eaten.

It seems, then, that these traditions represent a current, a surge of alive activity behind the forms that the traditions take. They represent our family's cohesiveness, belongingness, protection, social continuation. They represent our "us-ness." I suspect it was something like this that was the alive activity which led to the need for the word tradition when it was first coined. Perhaps more in a societal than a family sense, but nevertheless activity which illustrated safety, togetherness, mutual support, protection, social cohesiveness.

I realized, as I wrote, however, that all traditions did not have the qualities of being amendable and expandable--hence the need to talk about a second form. There are traditions that do not represent a current of life force but instead are dead shells and empty formalities. My own experience provided examples of these kinds of traditions, too. I remembered a time I ran out of gas on Interstate 75 between Chattanooga and Cleveland. I walked about a mile to the

next cloverleaf. There the unconsciousness that results from always doing a thing a certain way caused me to commit a very foolish act. Instead of cutting directly across the freeway to the service station on the other side, I walked as though I were driving a car: up the ramp to the right, all away across the bridge, past the down ramp on the other side, and then to the service station. I was just on automatic pilot; because the usual thing to do was to go that way in a car, I had not even recognized that on foot I could cut a lot of distance and save myself much energy, as well as get the gas quicker, if I were only alert and thinking.

I also remembered a second instant of dead tradition: the way I taught my first college classes. John Bradley, Pat Handley, and I sat down the first thing when Cleveland State opened and made a sheet telling students how many errors and of what kind constituted a certain grade. I remember that three major errors equalled an "F," and we were adamant about this, at least Pat and I were. My part in that activity was almost mindless. I merely copied what I had seen done before.

I went into class that year with enormous loads of books. I remember often not having enough room to put them on the table. I would read the entire class period from introductions to literature texts; I would lecture for the whole hour on parts of speech or Harbrace rules of conduct. My main refuge in those early years was giving grades, and students that I had then mainly remember me now--not for something valuable and exciting I taught them in English--but for my unbelievably hard grades. I threatened, argued, scolded, and, in general, kept a steel-head determination about the whole thing. (This summer I saw for the first time in ten years a student from that first term at Cleveland State. She is now a missionary to the Indians in the New Mexico desert. I can only think that the hard time I gave her in freshman comp make the difficulties of her present life seem slight by comparison. She must think her persent adversities slight.)

I noticed even then that there was a big difference in the amount of pleasure I got from teaching. But what I didn't know was that I was actually scared silly. To tell the truth, I didn't know how to teach a college class. I had no idea what freshman English was all about; I didn't have a philosophy about how people learn or what the English discipline could and could not provide for students. Because I was afraid--fear masked behind sterness and strictness--I taught material and not students. I was living out tradition in the worse sense of the word--in its Middle English meaning, to surrender, to betray, equivalent to give over. Tradition in that case cost me aliveness, peace, and joy. I dreaded class instead of loving it as I had when I taught in high school. I had walked into a situation about which I knew almost nothing, and my reaction had been to sink down into tradition the way people fall into a seat on a subway--to be carried along by the train on the tracks to wherever everybody else in the same car is going.

After seeing from examples in my own life the polar forms tradition can take, I knew that there is nothing inherently wrong with traditions themselves. The crucial thing is the liveliness of the spirit behind the tradition. I saw that there are some crucial questions: can a certain tradition be modified? can it be expanded? Do people use it consciously or unconsciously? Is it done because it's always been done that way; is it done as an escape from the risk of change? Does a tradition mask fear, or does it represent a live activity of the moment? I would like to apply these questions to a traditional activity we do in our writing classes to illustrate the promise that tradition holds if we can get in touch with the aliveness that generated it in the first place.

We have a traditional rule in essay writing that a paper must have a thesis sentence. This rule we find valuable because it brings focus to a paper and restricts a student to writing about one subject. Many handbooks begin with this

instruction: find a thesis sentence. Get a subject and limit it. Now, this is a good example of a tradition that at some time had a whole set of alive activity behind it--but somehow along the way as Jaynes says the image on the face of the coin got rubbed off and what we mainly have now is the rule. While we require and urge students to find a thesis sentence, we don't involve them often enough in how to find a thesis sentence. (One of the graduate students in a course in analysis of composition that Greg and I are teaching said the other night: my students don't have anything to say in their papers and I tell them to think!) Textbooks may suggest that students get a subject from their personal experience, from resource books inthe library, from things they know about--like hobbies, or from reading material in a second text. Few of these books offer any suggestion on how to find something to say by giving the student a verifiable teachable method of invention that will lead to subject matter's being generated. What often happens is that the student writer will make one quick run into his or her cognitive structure, find an idea lying closest to the top--almost invariably somebody else's --and out it comes to be the thesis for the paper. This leads to those papers that only a mother could love and only an English teacher, paid to do so, would read. Teachers attempt to counteract this lifelessness and banality by suggesting that students get a subject that means something to them, but what mostly happens is that we end up lamenting that kids just can't think anymore.

Fortunately, the deadliness of the tradition of requiring a thesis sentence is in for resusitation. For teachers are becoming more and more aware of the modern theories of invention, begun long ago with Aristotle but significantly surpassing the topics of those early rhetoric days. This modern theory of invention (defined as the art of eliciting knowledge and using knowledge to generate new insights or new knowsledge) holds that there are teachable external

for encouraging a student to think, for assisting a student in finding material that can lead to a lively thesis sentence, for eliciting discoveries that let a student put a particular subject context into a personal context so that the essay is individual and enjoyable to read. Competent writers, of course, automatically do this inventing; they either unconsciously generate creative material for essays or they have certain knacks for getting subject matter that work for their particular case. Student writers, however, have to be taught and shown invention techniques, and we are only just now moving to replace the vacuum behind the traditional rule with the alive activity that more than likely led to the rule in the first place.

There are abroad in the land several theories of ways to invent, several alternative explicit methods that can be used in the classroom. The first chapter of Gary Tate's book, TEACHING COMPOSITION, gives a summary of the major approaches to the subject. It's exciting to read. There is prewriting as practiced by Rohman, Elbow, and modified by Van Nostrand and Sheridan Baker; Young, Becker and Pike's tagmemic invention; Burkes' use of five key terms to elicit subject matter; Larson's problem solving; neoclassic invention techniques represented by several theorists. Every one of these methods can be adapated to the classroom to show students how to come up with material for an essay.

What is interesting, however, is that out of the 4,212 freshman English texts (as of last summer) very few of them give any space to modern invention theory. Some of the new texts do include the material--and the more eclectic the coverage the more useful it is to the teacher--but these, unfortunately, aren't the best-selling books around the country. Invention still smacks, to the unknowledgeable, as activity which is not serious, play time, something to get students loosened up but when are we going to get down to serious writing. This attitude confuses invention--actually a rigorous intellectual discipline--with unfocused free writing which is also valuable but is not what I mean in

the context of invention theory. This confusion is changing, however; people will have to recognize the scope of invention theory when they learn, for instance, that the National Endowment for the Humanities has just funded a year-long seminar at the University of Michigan which will study just one aspect of composition; for nine months teachers will study only invention.

More and more teachers are coming to see that until students learn how to find something original and fresh in their essays we can teach the thesis sentence until we fall into a dead faint and students will continue to hate English and stop writing the minute they get out of the door. I think of the girl John Holt writes about who, at the end of her freshman year in college, wrote home to her mother, "Hooray, Hooray! Just think--I never have to take English any more!" Unfortunately, Holt says, before that experience the girl had always been an excellent English student who had loved books, writing, and ideas.

Invention has got to be treated as more than a warm-up exercise. It must have equal time with arrangement, style, and editing. When this happens, the rule about a thesis sentence comes to life. It isn't that the rule is wrong, certainly not. The result of a successful invention phase of the writing process is that a student has something to pull together into a thesis sentence. The thesis sentence is the natural culmination of the invention process. What happens, however, when writing instruction begins with the thesis sentence instead of the creating activity behind it is that the writing--like those religious practices in the Old Testament--has a form but denies the power thereof. There is hardly a better example of a dead tradition that can come back to life when the activity behind it is revived. Students who find something to say through one of the methods of formal invention theory will understand about thesis sentences and will be more than able to meet the requirements.

It would seem, then, that there can be no final position taken on the

word tradition. It's just not that pat. Some traditions are alive, viable, and useful; they still partake of the spirit behind them; they are amendable and expandable. Other traditions are coffins; they hold only skeletons. These traditions lead to death-in-life. They are dangerous to anyone who wants to live life awake. Being conscious allows us to know one from the other. That is our salvation.

Several times this past week I have listened to the beautiful music from FIDDLER ON THE ROOF. In that lovely opening song, "Tradition," Tevye says, "A fiddler on the roof? Sounds crazy, eh? But here in our little village of Anatevka, you might say all of us are fiddlers on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant simple tune without breaking our necks." What has made that possible, Tevye goes on to say, what has allowed them to keep their balance all these years is tradition. What we learn by the end of the play, however, is that those admirable Russian Jews must take their traditions elsewhere; they have to hold on to the spirit and life of the traditions because they are forced to leave the forms at home. Have those villagers' resiliency and bravery to transfer and modify traditions to wherever and whatever they have to be will allow us English teachers to keep the ones that are still useful and to discard those that aren't. For we, too, are fiddlers on the roof. We are also trying to scratch out a pleasant simple tune without breaking our necks.

Elizabeth Cowan
Texas A&M University